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NEWSPAPER ADS**TOP ALASKA STORIES****Explanation sought for beluga population puzzle****COOK INLET: White whale numbers have remained stagnant since '90s when they dipped for causes unknown.**

By DOUG O'HARRA

Anchorage Daily News

(Published: May 28, 2004)

If overhunting caused Cook Inlet beluga whales to crash during the 1990s, shouldn't the white adults and gray calves that forage in the ocean near Anchorage be recovering by now?

What about killer whales as a cause, or strandings?

Or how about even more difficult prospects, some politically charged and expensive: Maybe oil platform discharges, sewage from Anchorage, industrial shipping or the droning chaos of sportfishing boats and jet skis is keeping belugas down.

"The hunters have been in the public eye, they've taken your whipping, and yet you have 24, 25 whales dead last year," Delice Calcote, secretary of the Native hunting group Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council, told federal biologists during a meeting on beluga conservation.

"I think we should have good studies of what's being dumped from all different places," she said. "What the heck is going on?"

Calcote was among about 30 Alaska Natives, scientists, environmentalists, officials and citizens who met with National Marine Fisheries Service managers Tuesday to help launch a conservation plan for Cook Inlet beluga whales.

Once thought to number 1,300, the whales plummeted during the 1990s in a decline federal biologists blamed on overhunting by Alaska Natives, the only people allowed to kill them. The genetically isolated

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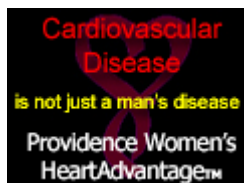
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population was listed as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 2000, and hunting was limited to one or two whales per year.

Biologists hoped the whales would naturally rebound. But since 1998, the population has hovered between an estimated 350 and 400 animals with no sign of a trend up or down.

Beluga experts point out it might take years before scientists can know what's going on because the whales spend most of their time submerged in silty, white-capped water and are difficult to count.

"This stock is not going to be recovered in just a few years. ... It might be decades," federal biologist Brad Smith told the group Tuesday. The fisheries service tries to count whales each June, spent several years tracking whales with satellite tags to find important summer and winter habitat, and has helped produce hunting regulations.

The conservation plan, required by the marine mammal act, is several years overdue. It must be done, Smith explained, and should look at factors other than hunting, which has already been studied. The agency hopes to produce a draft for public review by midsummer and finish the document before the end of the year.

"We want this plan to have hard action items ... and measurable objectives," Smith said.

Some factors in beluga life should be easy to address. The whales do strand on mud flats when the tide goes out, but almost always survive, Smith said. Killer whales occasionally attack them, but that seems not to be increasing. Harvest by Natives is now closely regulated and won't take place at all in 2004 because at least 20 whales washed up dead last summer, apparently due to natural causes.

"We don't believe right now that it is going to be Native harvest that is going to determine whether the stock will recover," Smith said. "It's going to be comprehensive actions" on other issues.

For instance, Smith said, "belugas are horribly sensitive to noise. ... There's an awful lot of noise going into these waters, and we don't have a real good understanding of how that's affecting belugas."

Another question: What about beluga whales competing for salmon with Cook Inlet fishermen? People are probably not taking enough salmon to affect the whales, Smith said, "but that's one thing we intend to look at."

With beluga management biologist Barbara Mahoney writing down suggestions on poster sheets, people raised dozens of matters that might deserve investigation, ranging from pollution or runoff from cities to the suspicion that Cook Inlet has been gradually silting up and getting shallower.

For instance, could shipping in Cook Inlet be forcing the whales from

near-shore channels leading to the river mouths where they want to feed? Bruce Oskolkoff of Ninilchik said residents have noticed that the whale decline seemed to correspond to an increase in ship traffic, especially by the liquid natural gas carriers.

"The people who live there, it's no mystery to them," he said. "And one of the things we ought to try to focus on is getting that knowledge."

Bob Shavelson, of the environmental watchdog group Cook Inlet Keeper, said the plan should consider discharges by oil platforms and sewage treatment plants.

Kotzebue leader Ross Schaeffer, chairman of the Arctic-based Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, said the agency should be looking into climate and global warming.

Others mentioned noise from seismic exploration, aircraft over the Inlet, harassment by people riding personal watercraft, runoff of de-icing chemicals from airports and roads, exposure to chemicals from the military firing range in Eagle River flats and the potential impact by the proposed bridge across Knik Arm.

Several people criticized the fisheries agency. Barrow resident Charlie Edwardsen, who works with Cook Inlet tribes, told Smith that he was disappointed with previous environmental studies about the harvest and other agency reports about the whales.

"It's so haphazard," he said during a break.

Still, Mahoney said later the comments would help her identify research that must be done. "People realize that we're working hard on the beluga stuff," she said.

As the list on the wall got longer, several people pointed out that the agency couldn't possibly investigate all of the issues in the next few weeks or months. Henry Springer, executive director of the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, urged the agency to focus on things that could be changed.

"Oil platforms aren't going away, shipping isn't going away and development isn't going away," he said. "I don't think you can come up with any reasonable management plan if you don't take a realistic approach."

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COOK INLET WHALES: Follow the link for more information about federal management of of belugas and the new conservation plan.
www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/whales/beluga.htm